

Guide to Civil Discourse for students

“I never considered a difference of opinion in politics, in religion, in philosophy, as cause for withdrawing from a friend.” - Thomas Jefferson

A civil discourse is a conversation in which there is a mutual airing of views. It is not a contest; rather, it is intended to promote mutual understanding. Civil discourse follows general rules of polite behavior. This does not mean that you have to behave like Mr. or Ms. Manners, but it does mean that there are certain behaviors that make everyone uncomfortable and that indicate that a conversation has turned hostile and unproductive.

There is really just one rule of Civil Discourse: **Don't make it personal.** This means to stick to the issues. In a civil discussion, you use logic, persuasion, evidence, information and argumentation to make a point or defend a position, but you would not attack the other individual personally. Civil discourse means being **respectful** of the other person and his or her views.

Each person in a civil discourse is entitled to his/her own opinions and is entitled to be treated with respect and dignity.

WHAT IS NOT CIVIL DISCOURSE:

Being **disrespectful** is not engaging in civil discourse. Here are some disrespectful behaviors that are typically considered out of bounds: **profanity, name-calling*, derogatory terms (stupid, ignorant...), shouting, insulting body language (such as eye-rolling), insulting tone of voice (baby talk, speaking “down” to a person), ridicule, open hostility, biting sarcasm, any other disrespectful acts or ad hominem attacks, threats, or any behavior that could get a person banned from a social media site.** A central theme of disrespectful discourse is that it employs tactics designed to dismiss the other person, rather than engage with the other argument.

*[*Name-calling can include words ending in -ist, or -phobe or beginning with anti – and similar critical terms. It also includes derisive terms like “snowflake” or “feminazi.” These are modern, politicized variations on name-calling but are still dehumanizing labels that can be considered hurtful and counterproductive when used to condemn or demonize a person or their ideas. They can diminish a person’s dignity while stifling the ability to engage in dialogue. All name-calling can be considered dehumanizing and an attempt to reduce and minimize a complex person to one diminished thing in order to then dismiss his/her argument without considering it. It is an attack on the other person’s character. In a civil discussion, you attack the argument, never the person making it.]*

Ultimately, the people involved in a discussion get to decide what is “civil” and what is not; some people can insult one another quite happily and remain friends. It typically depends on how well

you know the other person. It can be very helpful to state clearly what is “out of bounds” before a discussion, but in real life, that isn’t always possible. If you find yourself in a discussion that turns incivil, the best response is to respond directly to the problematic behavior and its effects on you, *not* the other person. So, for example, if the other person calls you a derogatory term during a discussion, the proper response would be to simply say: “I don’t like being called names. It hurts my feelings.” If the person recognizes that s/he has crossed the line into incivil tactics, then the discussion can proceed, but if not, it is probably best to end the discussion politely, because it is no longer civil or productive. The other person is likely taking it too personally to engage in a civil discourse at this time.

You can be a role model for how to engage in civil discourse for others. How you deal with an antagonist may have a profound effect on the other person. If you deal with them calmly, with manners and respect and dignity, they are apt to feel remorse and behave better in future encounters. If you resort to name-calling or other incivil tactics in response to poor behavior, then you will be contributing to the rise of incivil discourse in our culture.

Remember: you can disagree and still remain friends.